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A HISTORICAL INACCURACY IN CORNEILLE'S "NICOMÈDE"

The late Professor John E. Matzke of Leland Stanford Junior University has pointed out that Amyot's *Plutarch* is one of the sources of Corneille's *Mort de Pompée* and *Horace*.¹ A curious bit of additional evidence of Corneille's familiarity with Amyot is found in *Nicomède*. It involves the identity of the Roman consul Flaminius and the motives that the poet attributes to him for having brought about the death of Hannibal. An outline of the situation at the beginning of the play will bring the point out more clearly.

The Nicomède of the play is a noble prince whose native military genius has been trained by the great Hannibal, a refugee at the court of his father, Prusias, king of Bithynia. He is the idol of the Bithynian army and has led it to the conquest of a large part of Asia Minor. His affianced bride is Laodice, queen of Armenia, the ward of Prusias and residing at his court. Prusias, in the play, is represented as a weak-willed monarch entirely dominated by his second wife, Arsinoé, who is planning to place Attale, her own son and Nicomède's half-brother, upon the throne at the death of her husband. When the play opens she has already brought about through Flaminius the return of her own son from Rome and, in return for this favor, has caused the death of Hannibal. She has also made Prusias jealous of his elder son and has represented to Rome that the union of the crowns of Bithynia and Armenia would be a menace

¹ *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. XV, 1900; *Modern Philology*, Vol. I, 1904.

to Roman sovereignty in Asia, so that Flaminius comes charged with the mission of preventing the marriage of Nicomède and Laodice. Arsinoé's dream is to outplay Rome as well as Nicomède, by eventually marrying Attale to Laodice and by assuring to him at the same time the throne of Bithynia. She gets Nicomède away from the army by causing to be disclosed to him a sham plot for his assassination. The news of the death of Hannibal and the fact that Attale has begun paying court to Laodice also hasten the young hero's return.

Nothing need be said here about the way in which Corneille has changed the characters of Prusias and Nicomède from those which history ascribes to them. The historical prototype of the former was Prusias II of Bithynia, surnamed "the Hunter." It was in all probability at his court that the death of Hannibal occurred in 183 B.C. His son Nicomedes II ascended the throne in 149 or 148 B.C. and was succeeded by his son Nicomedes III in 91 or 90 B.C. Nicomedes III was the last king of Bithynia. When he died in 76 or 74 B.C., he left his kingdom to the Roman republic. It is, of course, with Nicomedes III that we are to identify the Nicomède of our play.

In his "Avis au lecteur" and again in his "Examen" of the play Corneille states as follows the liberties which he has taken with history in his use of the episode of the mission of Flaminius:

J'ai approché de cette histoire [that of Nicomède and Laodice] celle de la mort d'Annibal, qui arriva un peu auparavant chez ce même roi, et dont le nom n'est pas un petit ornement à mon ouvrage. J'en ai fait Nicomède disciple pour lui prêter plus de valeur et plus de fierté contre les Romains; et, prenant l'occasion de l'ambassade où Flaminius fut envoyé par eux vers ce roi, leur allié, pour qu'on remit entre leurs mains ce vieil ennemi de leur grandeur, je l'ai chargé d'une commission secrète de traverser ce mariage, qui devait leur donner de la jalousie. J'ai fait que, pour gagner l'esprit de la reine, qui, suivant l'ordinaire des secondes femmes, avait tout pouvoir sur celui de son vieux mari, il lui ramène un de ses fils que mon auteur [Justin] m'apprend avoir été nourri à Rome. Cela fait deux effets; car, d'un côté, il obtient la perte d'Annibal par le moyen de cette mère ambitieuse, et, de l'autre, il oppose à Nicomède un rival appuyé de toute la faveur des Romains, jaloux de sa gloire et de sa grandeur naissante.

Now this episode as it appears in the play contains other historical inaccuracies than those mentioned by Corneille in the passage just

quoted. A citation from the play will bring this out. In the fifth scene of the first act we have a conversation between Arsinoé and her "confidente" Cléone in which the latter expresses doubts as to the scrupulous honor of the Romans. She cites the death of Hannibal in support of her misgivings. Arsinoé answers:

Ne leur impute pas une telle injustice:
 Un Romain seul l'a faite, et par mon artifice.
 Rome l'eût laissé vivre, et sa légalité
 N'eût point forcé les lois de l'hospitalité.
 Savante à ses dépens de ce qu'il savait faire,
 Elle le souffrait mal auprès d'un adversaire;
 Mais quoique, par ce triste et prudent souvenir,
 De chez Antiochus elle l'ait fait bannir,
 Elle aurait vu couler sans crainte et sans envie
 Chez un prince allié les restes de sa vie.
 Le seul Flaminius, trop piqué de l'affront
 Que son père défait lui laisse sur le front;
 Car je crois que tu sais que quand l'aigle romaine
 Vit choir ses légions au bord du Trasimène,
 Flaminius, son père, en était général,
 Et qu'il y tomba mort de la main d'Annibal;
 Ce fils donc, qu'a pressé la soif de la vengeance,
 S'est aisément rendu de mon intelligence:
 L'espoir d'en voir l'objet entre ses mains remis
 A pratiqué par lui le retour de mon fils;
 Par lui j'ai jeté Rome en haute jalousie
 De ce que Nicomède a conquis dans l'Asie,
 Et de voir Laodice unir tous ses états,
 Par l'hymen de ce prince, à ceux de Prusias:
 Si bien que le sénat prenant un juste ombrage
 D'un empire si grand sous un si grand courage,
 Il s'en est fait nommer lui-même ambassadeur,
 Pour rompre cet hymen et borner sa grandeur.
 Et voilà le seul point où Rome s'intéresse.

Two points are of interest here. First, Arsinoé represents herself as the first cause of Hannibal's death, absolving Rome of all blame for it. This is probably false historically, as the evidence of the historians points to the implication of Rome in the affair. Livy (Book 39, chap. 51) and Justin (Book 32, chap. 4) both tell us that, when the Romans heard of Hannibal's aiding Prusias in his war

against Eumenes II, king of Pergama, they sent ambassadors to the Bithynian court to demand that Prusias cease hostilities against Eumenes and surrender Hannibal.

I cite on this point a portion of a note by Naudet printed by Marty-Laveaux and Hémon in their respective editions of Corneille:¹

Ne dirait on pas qu'il a pris un remords à Corneille de maltraiter ses chers Romains dans cette pièce, et qu'il veut les relever un peu? Arsinoé se donne trop d'importance et se fait plus criminelle qu'elle ne l'est. Elle pouvait se rendre l'instrument des desseins de Rome afin d'en profiter pour elle-même et pour son fils. Mais qu'elle ait pu influencer sur la politique du sénat et l'émouvoir à son gré, c'est une illusion à laquelle on ne se prêtera pas, pour peu qu'on connaisse l'antiquité.

Now, while Corneille may have been actuated by a desire to rehabilitate the Romans, it is also likely that we have here a reminiscence of Amyot. In the life of Flaminius as it appears in the fourth volume of the Clavier edition of Amyot's *Plutarch* (Paris, 1802) we find the statement that Rome was quite aware that Hannibal was living at the Bithynian court but that she took no notice of it, believing her old enemy to be no longer dangerous, but that Flaminius, having been sent to Bithynia on other business, saw Hannibal there, and not being able to bear the thought that he was still alive, brought about his death, in spite of the entreaties of Prusias. It is further stated that, at Rome, many blamed Flaminius for having, out of mere desire for fame, so driven to death a defenseless enemy. It is true that in his subsequent narrative Plutarch says that some praised Flaminius for what he had done and that certain historians even claim that he had been sent to the court of Prusias for that express purpose. While this second version of the story is probably nearer to the truth, it does not seem improbable that the first and more inaccurate version may have had some influence on Corneille.

The second and more interesting question raised by the passage I have cited from the play has to do with the identity of Flaminius. Corneille makes him the son of the consul who commanded the Roman forces at Lake Trasimenus (217 B.C.) and who met his death in that battle so disastrous to Roman arms.

¹ Marty-Laveaux, V, 225; Hémon, IV, 226.

There are two other references in the play to this supposed relationship. In vss. 581–84, Nicomède says, speaking of Flaminius:

Il doit savoir qu'un jour il me fera raison
D'avoir réduit mon maître au secours du poison,
Et n'oublier jamais qu'autrefois ce grand homme
Commença par son père à triompher de Rome.

Again, in vss. 619–30, the same character says:

Et si Flaminius en est le capitaine,
Nous pourrons lui trouver un lac de Trasimène.

All this is, of course, historically false. The Flaminius of our play is the Titus Quintus Flaminius who defeated Philip V of Macedonia at Cynocephalae in 197 B.C. He was of a patrician family and was not related, as far as is known, to the Caius Flaminius of plebeian origin who was defeated and killed at Lake Trasimenus.

The mistake is noted by both Marty-Laveaux and Hémon, who cite a note by Palissot on the subject.¹ After pointing out the error, Palissot concludes:

Corneille, quoique très instruit, fut trompé, selon toute apparence, par la conformité des noms; et ce qui nous le persuade, c'est que, lorsqu'il se permet de donner volontairement quelque atteinte à la vérité de l'histoire, il ne le dissimule jamais dans l'examen de ses pièces, et qu'il y rend compte des motifs qui ont pu l'autoriser à se donner cette licence, mais on ne trouve rien ni dans la préface ni dans l'examen de Nicomède qui prouve que Corneille ait pu prendre ici quelque liberté.

We may grant that Corneille was probably ignorant of the liberty he was taking with history, but that he was confused by a mere conformity of names seems doubtful in view of the following.

There appears in several editions of Amyot's *Plutarch* a supplement consisting of the lives of Hannibal and Scipio Africanus translated by Charles de Léluse (or Lescluse),² a noted savant who was

¹ Marty-Laveaux, V, 525; Hémon, IV, 226; cf. also Hémon, IV, 135.

² According to Hofer, *Nouvelle biographie universelle*, Vol. XXX (Paris, Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1881) they were published in folio in Paris in 1565 along with Amyot's version of Plutarch's lives and were subsequently reprinted several times. It is stated in Vol. XXIII of Michaud's *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* that they were published in octavo in Paris by Vascosan in 1562 and that they serve to complete the sixth volume of the same edition of Plutarch. In the Clavier edition of Amyot (Paris, 1802) they appear at the end of Vol. IX.

born at Arras between 1524 and 1526 and who died at Leyden in 1609. These lives seem to have been originally written in Latin by the Florentine Donato Acciajuoli (1428-78) and to have been published along with some Latin translations made by him of certain lives of Plutarch.¹

In the life of Hannibal contained in this supplement there appears the following statement:

La venuë de Flaminius luy augmentoit d'avantage la suspicion, lequel il estimoit estre le plus grand ennemy qu'il eust en Rome, tant publiquement pour la haine commune de tous les Romains, que particulièrement pour la mémoire de son père Flaminius, lequel fut tué en la bataille qui se donna auprès du lac Trasimène.

The rest of the narrative of Hannibal's death agrees pretty closely with the same story as told by Plutarch in the life of Flaminius referred to above.

As to the fact that Corneille represents the consul Caius Flaminius as having been killed by Hannibal himself, Naudet is probably right in calling this a "gratuitous supposition of the poet's."² Polybius says that Flaminius was killed by a party of Celts. Livy relates that he was slain by a soldier named Ducarius. The version of Acciajuoli agrees in this respect with that of Livy. It does seem, however, that we have in the passage just cited the source of Corneille's error in making the Flaminius of his play the son of the consul slain at Lake Trasimene. It might, of course, be claimed that our poet was merely seeking effect and needed no suggestion for the liberty he has here taken with history, but in view of his familiarity with Amyot, it is probable that the responsibility belongs to Acciajuoli and De Lécuse.

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¹ Cf. Hoefer, *op. cit.*, Vol. I; Michaud, *op. cit.*, Vol. I; also Hoefer, Vol. XXX, and Michaud, Vol. XXIII, under Lécuse.

² Cf. Marty-Laveaux, *op. cit.*; Hémon, *op. cit.*